

Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (Hamish Hamilton, 2017)

Mohsin Hamid's most recent novel, *Exit West* (2017), focuses on the concept of belonging in relation to place and space in a politically unstable global landscape. Replacing the second person address – or narrative apostrophe – that characterises the Pakistani author's earlier works of fiction, *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), with an omniscient third-person narrator, Hamid situates his tale in the past, in an unnamed city on the brink of civil war. The city's anonymity acts to universalise the context in which the novel's characters find themselves, and encourages the reader to imagine how one's own city might change if subjected to a similar scenario. As the situation in the nameless city deteriorates, and militants belonging to an undisclosed faction wrest control from government forces, the novel's protagonists, a young couple named Saeed and Nadia, flee the country of their birth in search of safety. What is curious about their escape, however, is that it occurs via neither the Mediterranean Sea nor the well-traipsed overland route west, to Europe.

Rather, Nadia and Saeed travel through a door. But this is no ordinary door, for it has the ability to 'take you anywhere' (69). In the same way that the otherwise unremarkable closet in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* functions as a passage to another world, the door in Nadia and Saeed's city acts as a portal to a place far removed from their home. However, despite the teleportative qualities that Lewis's closet and Hamid's door share, there is an important distinction between them: the latter is only one of many and, far from being unique to Nadia and Saeed's city these magical doors are being used by people the world over to escape their own perilous circumstances. In fact, nearly every chapter of *Exit West* includes a detailed reference to a door which has inexplicably transformed into a passage from one part of the globe to another. Examples include doors leading from the Philippines to Tokyo, from Rio de Janeiro to Amsterdam, and from Kentish Town to Namibia.

The global proliferation of these mysterious doors grants Hamid's novel a sweeping transnational scope, as the author details, amongst other people and places, the memories of an old woman in Palo Alto, the disturbance caused by the presence of a door in the house of a retired Naval Officer in San Diego, and even an afternoon in the life of a young political activist in Vienna who is fighting against the rise of the far-right in her city. The narrative quality of these temporal and spatial oscillations situates the individual struggle of Saeed and Nadia's migration within the broader geopolitical and economic context of the world-system (101). Hamid's use of these magical doors thus effectively ties the local to the global in a cosmic corridor of connection through which characters are transported from the known to the unknown. In the case of Nadia and Saeed, the first door that they take leads them to the Greek Island of Mykonos – a location synonymous with the plight of refugees attempting to enter Europe. After a few turbulent months on the island, the couple escapes through another door. This particular portal leads them to London, and it is in England's capital where Hamid's depiction of the scope of the refugee crisis is at its most demonstrable. Once in London Nadia, Saeed, and many other migrants are made to feel unwelcome by 'nativist' mobs that desire to reclaim 'Britain for Britain,' and are subjected to acts of violence at the hands of the country's police and armed forces (131, 132). The protagonists and their fellow refugees find themselves cordoned off in

Book reviews: *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid. Philip Sulter.

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

militarised ‘zones’ – dystopian and dangerous areas known as ‘dark London’ (142). It is under these conditions that Nadia and Saeed’s relationship begins slowly to fracture – a result of their perpetual ‘state of unnatural nearness in which any relationship would suffer’ (138).

Regardless of the foreseeable end of their communion, the couple leaves London together through yet another door, which this time takes them to the town of Marin on the outskirts of San Francisco. It is on the West Coast of the United States that they part company; Saeed falling in love with an imam’s daughter and Nadia with a chef. Love can see one through difficult times, Hamid seems to suggest, but it is itself not immune to change. In the same way that Nadia and Saeed migrate to and from various places, they also migrate towards and away from one another. This appears to be the crux of Hamid’s novel: the notion that ‘we are all migrants through time,’ irrespective of whether or not one leaves the place of one’s birth (209).

The front cover of *Exit West* depicts a piece of paper being pulled back to reveal a yawning abyss in the shape of a door; its inky blackness beckoning the reader towards an unknowable future. In this future, the novel implies that there is hope – hope for a better world in which one acknowledges the inherency of migration to the human condition. The novel asks the reader to understand that one does not belong to an imaginary homeland but to a global community. *Exit West* is a tale of love in the time of migration (though Hamid would doubtless wince at this reductionism) but it is also about how one is, as an individual, responsible for society at large. This is a societal matrix that requires and demands coexistence. Unlike *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the supernatural elements of Hamid’s latest novel begin and end with his inclusion of the teleportative doors. The migration of refugees to Europe and the geopolitical west is no fantasy story. Rather, it is a chronicle of struggle; struggle for place, space and recognition in a disorderly and unpredictable world.

Philip Sulter